44

"In Trust with the Gospel."

Baccalaureate Sermon,

Delivered at the Theological Seminary at Columbia, S. C.

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BY

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In Trust with the Gospel.

"But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts." —1 Thess. ii. 4.

THE text suggests as the subject for our consideration on this occasion certain qualifications and obligations of the ministers of Christ's gospel as these were illustrated in the experience of the Apostle Paul. We have here two things clearly indicated: (1), That Paul was sure of having received a divine commission; and (2), That in the fulfilment of that commission he was consciously acting under divine scrutiny. The text demands a word of explanation. The words "we were allowed of God" do not express the sense of the original. The meaning is, "we have been approved of God." The original describes an *approval as the result of examination and trial.* The last verb in the verse, "trieth," is the

same in the original as the first one. This much it is necessary to know in order to reach a clear understanding of the teaching of the passage. The text has been happily rendered in the Revised Version as follows: "But even as we have been approved of God to be intrusted with the gospel, so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which proveth our hearts."

I. My first observation is that *a minister should be (a tried man) a man approved of God.* This is a fact plainly asserted here by the apostle concerning himself, and doubtless, also, concerning Silas and Timothy, who were associated with him in the authorship of this epistle. "We have been approved of God." It is pertinent to inquire how this divine approval is manifested.

1. First, let me answer, *by divine grace in the heart and life.* Paul became a Christian before he became a preacher. It may be assumed that no man receives the divine approval who has not, like Noah, first "found grace in the eyes of the Lord." Long before Noah became "a preacher of righteousness" to the corrupt generation in which he lived,

it was known that he was "a just man . . . and walked with God." (Gen. vi. 8, 9.) The divine approval rests upon the man who "walks with God."

This *needs to be emphasized* in every age, and especially in the age in which we live. The preacher must be a man of God. No natural endowments, no training, no eloquence, no social qualities, however superb any of these may be, can atone for a lack of grace. Spiritual barrenness is the most woeful want in a minister of Christ. If there does not lie somewhere within his mental history a period of spiritual experiences in which God was revealed to him, and the transforming light of divine truth came pouring into his soul, flooding it with joy and peace, as the morning sun floods the earth with glory, he can never have received that approval of God which is the initial step in the Christian life. In other words, an unconverted man is not approved of God.

Nor should the minister's experiences cease with conversion. "This is the will of God, even your sanctification." (1 Thess. iv. 3.) There should be a certain richness,

or, as I may call it, luxuriance, in his spiritual life, which can only come from vigorous growth. Plants ordinarily grow steadily and almost imperceptibly, but some at certain periods in their history, advance, as it were, by leaps. The night-blooming cereus moves slowly through a protracted season of preparation, and then suddenly bursts into bloom in a single night. So the healthy spiritual life ordinarily grows steadily, but sometimes there come seasons of splendid progress, movements of heavenly illumination, in the consciousness of God's love and grace, which may be distinguished as epochs in one's religious biography. Every child of God, and the minister especially, should have some such experiences as these, which contribute so largely to the richness and fruitfulness of the Christian life.

It is safe to say that more men fail of large success in the ministry owing to the meagreness of their spiritual attainments than for any other reason. The holy life is approved of God because it is written, "Be ye holy, for I am holy, saith the Lord." (1 Pet. i. 16.) How can God approve of men

who have no profound convictions of truth and little abhorrence of sin; who are almost destitute of piety and real spiritual power; who are often controlled by worldly motives and obviously study their own personal advancement more than the furtherance of Christ's gospel? The world has various standards of success, many of which are false, but, however large a place a man may fill in the eye of the world, there is no true success in the Christian ministry for him who is not rich in the manifold grace of God.

2. Again, the divine approval is manifested *in a divine call to the work of the ministry*. God does not call every pious man into the ministry of the gospel; he chooses the men who are to serve him in this capacity, and his call is an unmistakable evidence of his approval.

But how shall a man become assured that he is called of God to preach the gospel? If the divine approval is necessary, how can he become certain that he has that approval?

(*a*), First, by the *approval* of *his own conscience*. God speaks through an enlightened Christian conscience. Let me emphasize

enlightened. I mean a conscience educated, purified and illuminated by the holy word and the Holy Spirit of God. Let not the candidate for the ministry suppose that he must be the subject of some supernatural mystical experience which, *nolens volens*, will drive him into the ministry. We are not justified in thinking God now calls men to preach in the same supernatural way that he employed in calling Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the Apostle Paul into his service. Supernatural and extraordinary methods were employed while God was gradually making known his will; but with the finished revelation in our hands, and with the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we need not look for supernatural experiences. We are now "taught of God" by his word and Spirit which are 'already in the world.' If, under such teaching, a man is led to the conscientious conviction that it is his duty to preach the gospel, he has strong evidence of a divine call. The approval of a conscience enlightened by the word and Spirit of God may be regarded as the approval of God himself. This sense of duty may arise in a

variety of ways: through love for Christ and the souls of men, through the suggestions of one's friends, through study of the Holy Scriptures, through the conscious possession of certain gifts which should be consecrated to God, or through the desire to use one's life in the noblest work possible for man; and it may be subject to serious fluctuations, sometimes strong and clear, and at others feeble and flickering; but no man should dare to preach the gospel and expect the divine approval who does not enter the ministry under a profound sense of duty.

(*b*), This sense of duty, however, is not, of itself, sufficient. The best of men may be mistaken, even in a matter of such supreme importance. Therefore, another element in the divine approval to be considered is *the judgment of the church*, as it manifests itself in the presbytery and in the people. He who fails to secure the approval of his brethren as one qualified to discharge the duties of a minister, and the approval of the people as one capable of preaching the gospel to edification, cannot claim to be approved of God. The voice of the people in this sense

is the voice of God. A man's devotion to his studies in the seminary in such a way as to command the approval of the faculty, his ability to acquit himself creditably before the presbytery, and the willingness of the people to accept his public ministrations—all of these considerations must be taken into account in determining the question of his call. His approval by God, as indicated by the original, is a result of examination and trial. His multitudinous examinations and trials, therefore, by his brethren and the people are not to be regarded by him as mere conventional formalities to be gotten through with on the easiest terms possible; but they are divinely-appointed tests of his ability, his character, and his qualifications to become a minister of the gospel and on which the divine approval of him is largely based. Paul's exhortation to Timothy is, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Tim. ii. 15). This means that the workman approved of God has nothing to be ashamed of in expounding and enforcing the word of truth.

But can that possibly be true of the man who has despised and neglected the golden hours of preparation, failed to pass his examinations in the seminary, slipped through presbytery as "an extraordinary case," and who then seeks to impose himself upon God's people as an accredited preacher of the gospel? As a fact, such a man is approved neither of God nor man; he should be ashamed of the course by which he has gained access to the ranks of the ministry; and doubtless many a time in the future there will be abundant reason why both he himself and God's long-suffering people should be ashamed of his feeble efforts to "divide the word of truth."

II. My next observation suggested by Paul's experience as it is recited in the text is, that *the minister of the gospel is a trusted man.*

1. After having been approved of God he is *intrusted with the gospel.* This is Paul's favorite method of describing his office as a minister of Christ. He regarded himself as an approved trustee of "the glorious gospel of the blessed God." This does not mean

simply that he had heard the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, and that, like many others who believed it, he was a sinner saved by grace, but also that a commission had been granted unto him to preach it to others. He was intrusted with the declaration of the gospel. He was a trustee of the gospel of grace, but not of the grace of the gospel. God only is the dispenser of grace. The Christian man is the recipient of that grace in the salvation of his own soul; but he is not intrusted with the dispensation of that grace to others. Neither is the approved minister of Christ a dispenser of divine grace, but simply a proclaimer of it. He cannot withhold grace or bestow it as he sees fit, but he can make known the fact in an authoritative way, that "the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men . . . teaching us that . . . our Saviour Jesus Christ . . . gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." (Titus ii. 11–14.)

There is a peculiar sense, therefore, in which the minister is intrusted with the truth

of the gospel. He is officially authorized to declare it; that which he has received of the Lord he is to deliver unto others, and he is responsible for the integrity and purity of the message. This treasure is committed to him. Should he fail to appreciate its value and permit it to become corrupted or weakened, and deliver unto others a different gospel from that which he has received, he is guilty of breach of trust.

2. The *honor* of *Christ* and the *dearest interests of the kingdom* are intrusted to him. He is an ambassador for Christ, and represents his Master among men very much as the ambassador of England to this country represents the Queen among our people. Suppose the ambassador of the English crown should misrepresent the attitude of that government to us, what serious complications might arise, and how perilous to life and property! But no such serious complications could possibly arise from such a misrepresentation as must inevitably arise when the ambassador for Christ misrepresents the attitude of his gracious Master to a world of dying sinners. Suppose that the minister of

God to whom the gospel is intrusted fails to declare the true divinity of Christ, his vicarious atonement, justification by faith, or any other vital doctrine in the scheme of redemption, the consequences for evil are simply unspeakable. He is sent as a messenger from the Prince of Peace to proclaim "Peace on earth, good will to men" on the gracious terms which God has provided through his Son; but suppose he fails to make the conditions of peace plain, or suggests others of his own devising, then he is unfaithful to the trust imposed in him. The honor of the King and the interests of the kingdom are not safe in his hands.

It is a great sin to betray such a trust, and yet it must be confessed that many men intrusted with the gospel have proved unfaithful. The bane of Israel in the latter days of the kingdom was the multitude of false prophets which infested the land; one of the chief difficulties in the early church was the number of false apostles and teachers who crept in unawares and corrupted the faith of the disciples; and the most serious danger in the church to-day is the large number of

men occupying official positions, as pastors and teachers, who are proving unfaithful to the trust committed unto them. Many instead of confining themselves to the proclamation of the gospel as it is found in God's word claim the privilege of modifying it, some by addition and others by subtraction, until it shall conform to their own views. Hence, it follows that much of the preaching of the present day fails to represent in its purity the gospel of the grace of God as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

3. This trusteeship of the gospel, which is committed to the minister of the word, also involves *the care of souls*. He holds it in trust for the benefit of others. The directors of this seminary hold its property and endowments in trust for the benefit of students for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Not only, therefore, are the rights of the donors of the funds involved, but also the rights of the students for the ministry for whose benefit the funds were given are involved in the direction of the seminary. So the minister of Christ to whom the gospel has been intrusted holds in his

hands the rights of sinful men. Those to whom the gospel was sent have a right to it. The minister is indebted to them. Paul, writing to the Romans, says: "I am debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians; both to the wise and to the unwise. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also." (Rom. i. 14, 15.) He acknowledges the debt, and says, that as far as he is able he is ready to discharge it. This should be the feeling of every man who is put in trust with the gospel. He owes a debt to sinful men which simple fidelity to the trust imposed in him obliges him to pay.

The care of souls is a very responsible trust. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of faithfulness on the part of those to whom this trust is committed. The infinite value of the soul itself should constantly weigh upon the heart and conscience of the minister of Christ. There is nothing else in our world to be compared to it. "For what shall it profit a man," asks our Lord himself, "if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man

give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark viii. 36, 37.) These questions are left unanswered, and forever must be. The imagination stands appalled before the thought of a lost soul, to secure the salvation of which there was called forth the most stupendous work of God. Wise men of the earth seek to accumulate its stores of wealth, of wisdom and of honor, but the wisest man of them all is the winner of souls. But his responsibility also is the greatest. The word of divine truth is indispensable to the salvation of souls, and the minister of the gospel is the trustee of saving truth and the dispenser of it. "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. x. 14.) Unsaved men are dependent upon the preachers, and the preachers are answerable to God for the integrity of their message and the faithfulness with which it is delivered. Therefore they should "watch for souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief." (Heb. xiii. 17.)

III. My third general observation, sug-

gested by the text, is that the minister should be *a true man*. As he is approved of God and intrusted with the gospel, it follows that he should be true to the trust committed to him—*tried*, *trusted*, *true*. "Even so we speak," says the apostle in the text, "not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts." Surely if there is a position in life which demands the utmost faithfulness, the minister occupies that position. No language can exaggerate the grievous consequences which ensue when he fails to meet, at least with a reasonable degree of faithfulness, the demands of God, of truth, and of the souls of men upon him. He stands in the breach between God and man, where the forces of heaven and earth meet and contend for the mastery; therefore his trumpet should give forth no uncertain sound.

It is clearly indicated in the text and the immediate connection what it means for a minister to be *true* to the trust committed to him.

1. First, he must *seek to please God who calls him*. "Not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth (or proveth) our hearts." He

is greatly tempted to adapt his message to the fancies of men rather than to their needs, and to forget that his first obligation is to God who calls him and not to men who hear him. But his whole course of conduct and labor should be shaped with a view to pleasing God rather than men, and his purpose should be to give to sinful men the gospel they need rather than the gospel they desire. The impenitent man does not thirst for the gospel which convicts him of sin and offers him salvation only through the unmerited favor of God; on the contrary, he is usually clamorous for a gospel of good works, of smooth words, and of practical things only, in which he asserts that the people are interested; and he is impatient of creeds and doctrines and the constant preaching of repentance, faith, and salvation by grace. But the gospel which is committed to the minister's trust is this gospel of "repentance towards God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ," and faithfulness towards his Master leaves him no alternative but to preach this gospel to "all men everywhere." We do not understand the apostle, however, as teaching

here that the minister in endeavoring to please God should necessarily make his message offensive to men. He must try to gain the hearer's attention and reach his heart and conscience. No preacher is justified, on the plea that he is striving to please God, in making the sweet message of divine grace so offensive to the people that they decline to listen to it. On the contrary, his effort should be to so commend the gospel "that by all means he may save some."

2. There is *no place* here, however, *for flattery* to which some are inclined. "For," says the apostle, "neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know." Flattery in the pulpit is unworthy of any true minister of Christ, but there is a broad distinction to be observed between flattery and words of righteous commendation. While Paul disclaimed the use of flattery, he often in his epistles expressed, in glowing terms, his high appreciation of the faith and good works of God's people. There are some ministers, it is painful to admit, who are sustained and driven forward on the wave of popular favor by the breezes which their own flattering

words create; but there are others who discourage their people by a lack of proper appreciation and by almost constant complaints. The wise man who is seeking to please his Master and faithfully execute the trust committed to him, will endeavor to avoid both extremes, and while not hesitating "to reprove and rebuke with all authority" when such a course is necessary, will not be stint of praise when praise is deserved.

3. "Nor," says the apostle, "at any time used we", "a *cloak of covetousness;* God is our witness." The true minister of Christ must avoid covetousness. The merest suspicion on the part of his people that he is controlled by avarice is fatal to his exercising the highest influence. Paul was almost morbidly sensitive upon this point, so much so that while he boldly asserted his right to a support from "the carnal things" of those to whom he ministered in "spiritual things," yet he ordinarily refused to accept any compensation from those to whom he preached the gospel. The minister is entitled to a support from those to whom he ministers in holy things, but when that becomes his ob-

ject, and avarice lays her greedy hands upon his heart, it is impossible for him to fulfil the office of a true and disinterested trustee of the gospel of the grace of God. He whose heart is set upon worldly gain cannot successfully preach a gospel of heavenly grace. One of the first lessons for the minister to learn is to be found in "the words of the Lord Jesus," which may be regarded as the motto of the gospel, namely, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

4. Again, Paul says, "Nor of men sought we glory." He who is bent upon obtaining the glory of men for himself cannot at the same time be truly seeking the glory of God. But it is the minister's work to proclaim the gospel for the glory of God. He must not, therefore, permit himself to thirst for the applause of men, or to study by what means it may be secured. Nothing is more intoxicating to a public speaker than popular applause; nothing is more conducive to the growth of worldly ambition and pride, and, consequently, nothing is more dangerous to the faithful performance of the preacher's duty than a superabundance of the praise of

men. He who would discharge his trust in the sight of God, who tries the heart, must be slow to seek glory of men.

5. It remains only to be said that the true minister must be *gentle* and *affectionate* in the proclamation of his message. Paul says, "But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children; so being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us." He who delivers the message of God's free grace and forgiving love to dying men should let his own heart also go with it. Ah, as gentle as a nurse with her children, the apostle suggests, so should we be towards those for whom Christ died! How great must have been his love for sinners, who brought salvation to them when he came down,

"And wept, and bled, and died!"

It is a gospel of love, wrought out in love, and offered in love. How dare we, to whom it is intrusted, present it in any other way? How can we go to men except in the spirit

of him who "came to seek and to save that which was lost," and, "who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." How can we represent it to the lost except in the spirit of the Saviour himself? Is he not still going about in his ministers seeking to save that which was lost? Is he not still going to the perishing, in those to whom the gospel is committed for dissemination, seeking "not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom" for their souls? Let no man, therefore, dare to preach the gospel of the Son of God except in gentleness and love. Thus only can he fulfil his trust, or properly represent the mind of God to a perishing world.